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Daniloff's Unwitting Role in Intrigue

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 5 — Nicholas S. Daniloff said today that he had been unwittingly caught up in a complex intelligence confrontation in Moscow between the Central Intelligence Agency and the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence and secret police agency.

Mr. Daniloff said he fell into a situation he still does not fully understand when he delivered to the American Embassy in 1985 an unsolicited letter from a bogus priest who he thinks was probably a K.G.B. agent.

The embassy's efforts to follow up the letter, he said in an interview, included two communications with the priest that mentioned Mr. Daniloff indirectly, apparently giving the Soviet authorities the impression that he was involved in American espionage.

He said the K.G.B. was planning to present the incident as key evidence against him if he had gone to trial.

Seen as Central to Case

Mr. Daniloff provided many new details today about the handling of the letter, an incident that has emerged since his return to the United States on Tuesday as central to both the case against

him in Moscow and the Soviet-American arrangement to free him and Genadi F. Zakharov, the convicted spy who was a Soviet employee of the United Nations.

Administration officials said after Mr. Daniloff's return here that one reason the White House had accepted an arrangement that to some extent equated his case with that of Mr. Zakharov was to avoid a Soviet trial in which the letter, particularly the C.I.A.'s handling of it, might become an issue.

Although the disclosures about the letter have not suggested in any way that Mr. Daniloff was knowingly involved in espionage, they have provided a possible explanation for why the Soviet authorities arrested him rather than another American correspondent to gain leverage for the release of Mr. Zakharov.

Mr. Zakharov, as part of the deal for Mr. Daniloff's freedom, was allowed to return to the Soviet Union last week after pleading no contest to espionage charges in New York.

Mr. Daniloff said today in an interview at the Washington bureau of The New York Times that he first met the bogus priest, a young man who identified himself as Father Roman, in December 1984, when he called the Moscow bureau of U.S. News & World Report. Mr. Daniloff was the magazine's correspondent.

Delivered Letter to Embassy

Although not convinced of the man's identity, Mr. Daniloff said he had decided to deliver a letter to the American Embassy that he found in his mailbox in January 1985 and that he assumed came from Father Roman.

"If I knew then what I know now, I would have burned the letter instead of taking it to the embassy," he said.

Mr. Daniloff said the letter was addressed to the United States Ambassador, Arthur A. Hartman. When the letter was opened at the embassy, he said, it contained an interior envelope addressed to William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence.

Since returning to Washington, Mr. Daniloff said, he has learned that the letter contained information, potentially valuable to the United States, about Soviet rocket technology.

A month later, he said, he was called to the embassy by a senior political officer he knew and was taken to a se-

crete room that is designed to thwart Soviet listening devices or other electronic surveillance.

Mr. Daniloff said they were joined by another top embassy officer who he now believes was the C.I.A. station chief in Moscow. Mr. Daniloff said he suspected the man's intelligence connections at the time but was not sure.

American intelligence agents operate under cover in Moscow, posing as diplomats. American correspondents, in the normal course of business, have contact with many embassy officers, not knowing which, if any, are C.I.A. officers.

Mr. Daniloff said he provided the embassy officers with the name and phone number of Father Roman.

"I also told them in no uncertain terms that I wanted nothing more to do with the matter," he said.

Several months later, in April or May 1985, he was called to the embassy a second time to discuss the letter, he said.

At this meeting, also held in the secure room, Mr. Daniloff said, he was told that the embassy had concluded that the delivery of the letter to him was part of a K.G.B. trap and that he would be well advised not to have any further contact with Father Roman.

K.G.B. Cited Father Roman

Mr. Daniloff thought the incident had ended there until his arrest on Aug. 30, when he was informed by a K.G.B. interrogator that there was evidence the embassy had twice communicated with Father Roman, once by letter, once by phone, both times indirectly mentioning Mr. Daniloff.

Mr. Daniloff said that at first he assumed the evidence was fabricated but that since returning to Washington he has learned that a C.I.A. officer in Moscow did communicate with Father Roman.

In one case, he said, a letter was sent to Father Roman saying that his letter to the embassy had been received with the aid of "the journalist."

Later, the American intelligence officer called Father Roman and introduced himself by saying he was "a friend of Nikolai," Mr. Daniloff said.

Administration officials confirmed last week that these steps, which they called "unprofessional," had been taken by the C.I.A. station in Moscow.